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A Transcendent Moment in the Land of Haibao

July 1, 2010 in [Uncategorized](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)



I'm finally in Shanghai, where the Gumby-like Haibao is amazingly even more omnipresent than the last time I was through (and then he seemed to be everywhere). I've come to check out the Expo, see some new sites, catch up with some old friends, do a bit of traveling, and, as I noted in an earlier post, take part in a dialog on World's Fairs past and present with Nick Land (that took place a few days ago) and host a weekly series of "[Cosmopolitan Conversations](#)" with assorted writers at the Glamour Bar at M on the Bund (those are still to come).

I thought that my first contribution to "China Beat" from this trip would either be about the dialog on World's Fairs, past and present, that I had with Nick Land the day after I arrived, my first visit to the Expo (I've made one brief foray there so far), or about the Glamour Bar conversations, the first of which will take place on July 4th and, in honor of that date, focus on Americans in Old Shanghai.



Posts on some or all of those topics will come in due time, but the first thing I want to blog about is something I didn't know would be part of my trip: attending a great concert by a musician who'd come here from the State. The concert, which I went to last night, featured the multi-talented [Abigail Washburn](#). As some readers of "China Beat" doubtless already know, she's not just an extraordinary banjo player and singer (known in part for her collaborations with Béla Fleck) but also someone with long-term ties to China (she speaks Chinese, has been involved in exchanges that bring together musicians from both sides of the Pacific, and was co-organizer of an inspiring earthquake relief project that you can find out more about and see a sample video from [here](#)).

The lingering effects of jet-lagged kicked in midway through her show, which didn't start until 10, so I only caught part of it, but what I saw and heard was truly extraordinary. Backed up by a tight band of musicians on varied instruments, she moved easily from gentle old-timey gospel-tinged numbers to kick-ass blues-inflected ones. She's doing a series of other gigs in China, so readers over here will

have several chances to can see and hear for themselves what impressed me so much—[one performance](#) that promises to be particularly exciting will be at a small local venue called Yuyingtang on July 1.

In closing, I should note that, though Washburn's show wasn't what I expected to write about first (I had no idea before getting here that she'd be coming through to play), it does have ties to the Glamour Bar and the Expo. And even can be linked, in a roundabout way, to things that came up during the the public exchange on International Exhibitions and World's Fairs that I was part of last weekend, during which I learned a lot of new things simply from sharing the stage with someone as knowledgeable and insightful as Nick and hearing the kinds of questions that came from the floor (mostly from people who'd be to the Expo, naturally, and had strong opinions about it, as many people here do).

The Glamour Bar connection is obvious: that's where I saw Washburn play.

The 2010 Expo connection is also clear: she's in the area at least in part because she's set to play a couple of shows at the USA Pavilion (including one today, July 2, that will also involve Harry Connick, Jr.—someone whose 2008 concerts in Shanghai inspired a [memorable piece](#) by Jeremiah Jenne at his blog). The USA Pavilion, which I haven't visited yet (so more about it another time), has gotten a lot of flack over the last year or so. And I've heard mixed reviews about it from people I've talked to over here (e.g., the energy and enthusiasm of the young volunteers from the States working there tend to be given high marks, the architecture and content lower ones). If playing there is what facilitated Washburn's trip to China this time, though, I have to say they definitely did something right.

As for the connection to what Nick and I discussed last Sunday...the link is perhaps only in my mind, but here it is:

One topic that came up that night was the interconnections between International Exhibitions, Expos, and theme parks, particularly the section of Disney World that is most clearly inspired by the World's Fairs of old, namely, the national districts in Epcot Center. And one of the last times that I went on a trip expecting many things, but not to hear a musical performance that knocked me out was when I made my first visit to Disney World back around the turn of the millennium. One of the biggest surprises of the time I spent in Epcot Center then was hearing a stunning performance by a *yangqin* (hammer dulcimer) player at the Chinese pavilion. It was the last place I expected to stumble on such accomplished musicianship, but the quality of the performance shouldn't have surprised me. After all, as someone pointed out at the time, after I had done some research and discovered the musician I had heard there was a regular who had come to Florida after establishing herself in China as a virtuoso performer on her instrument, there aren't that many places that you can get paid to practice your craft (albeit in front of a crowd) day after day.



So, I guess this just goes to show that, in the land of Mickey, as in the land Haibao, you can sometimes stumble onto moments of true musical transcendence...providing simply that the right stringed instrument is in the right pair of skillful hands.

